

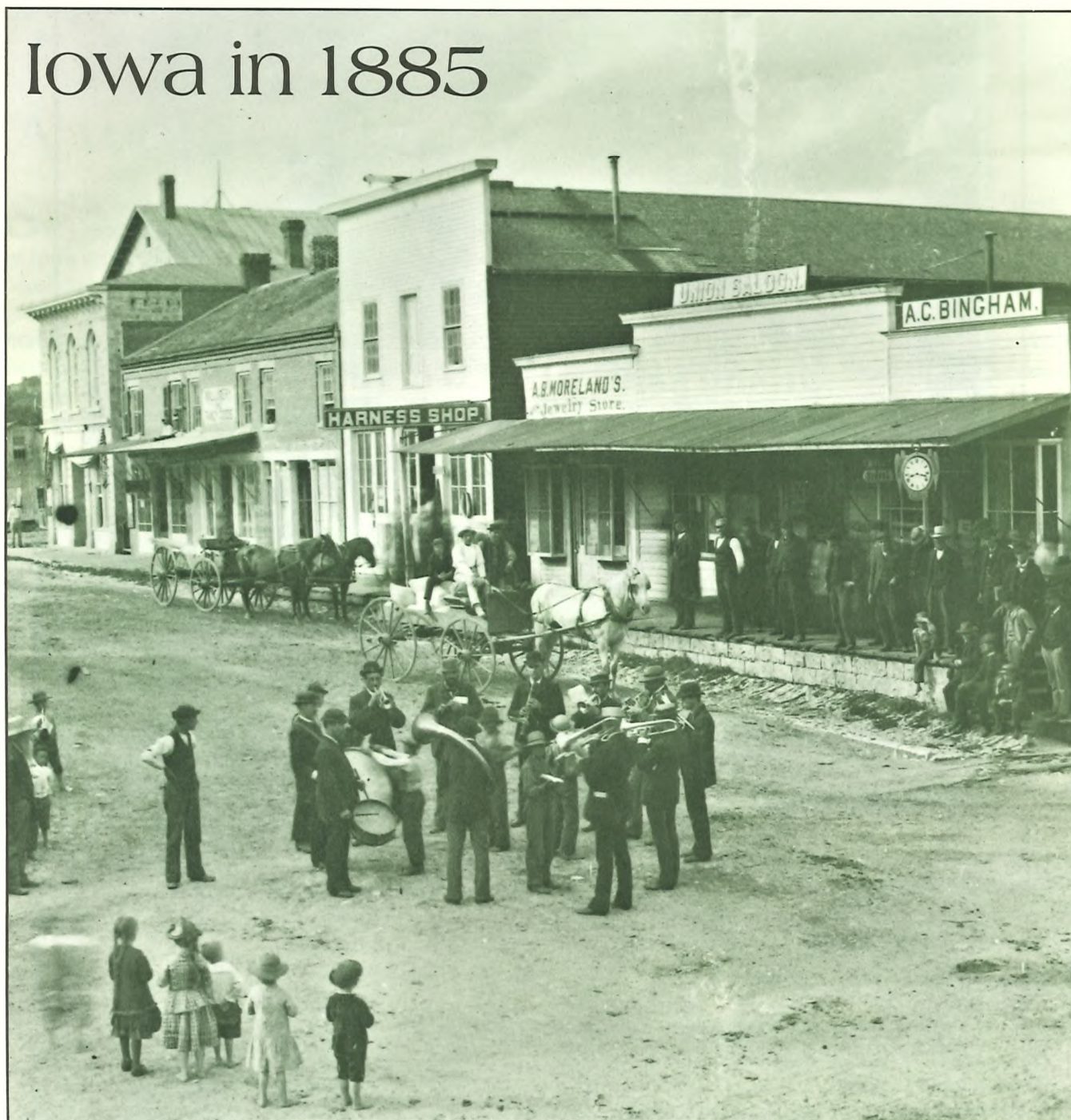
THE Goldfinch

Volume 6, Number 3

The Iowa History Magazine for Young People

February 1985

Iowa in 1885





D. C. Hale Collection, ISHD

Two men wait for customers outside the hardware store in Elkader a hundred years ago. How many of the following things can you spot in the picture? Which of these could be found in a store today?

butter churns (two kinds)

milk cans

soap kettles

barbed wire

doubletrees (hint: they're wooden with metal rings)

grindstones

wooden tub

wheelbarrows

pitchforks and hoes

post-hole digger

THE GOLDFINCH (ISSN 0278-0208) is published four times per school year by the Iowa State Historical Department, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240. Available by yearly subscription: 30 copies of 4 issues for \$25 (classroom rate), or 1 copy of 4 issues for \$5 (single-copy rate). Second-class postage paid at Iowa City, Iowa. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: THE GOLDFINCH, Iowa State Historical Department, 402 Iowa Avenue, Iowa City, Iowa 52240.

Iowa in 1885

IF YOU went shopping in a hardware store, would you find butter churns and soap kettles? Would the store have doubletrees and grindstones?

People don't churn their own butter or make their own soap anymore. Farmers don't grind their grain with grindstones. They don't need doubletrees for hitching horses to wagons, because now tractors pull the wagons.

But if you lived in Iowa in 1885, you might have

needed to buy these things. And you would have bought them at a store like the one shown on the left.

What was it like to live in Iowa one hundred years ago? What did children do for fun? What was school like? Life is very different now. But in what ways do you think things are still the same?

That's what this *Goldfinch* is all about—Iowa in 1885.

A world of horses

SINCE the late 1830s, pioneers had come to Iowa to buy land and begin new homes. But by 1885 most of Iowa was settled. There were many towns and cities. Most farm families didn't have to travel many miles to get to a store. Farms covered most of the state. In northwestern Iowa there was still some land that hadn't been settled. But even that land was quickly being bought in the 1880s.

Railroads had been built over all parts of the state. The trains carried coal, grain, goods, lumber, animals,

and, of course, people, to towns in and out of Iowa.

But Iowans still needed horses for work and travel. In 1885 there was one horse for about every two people in the state. Take a minute to look out your window. Imagine that all the trucks, cars, buses, and tractors are horses, or some kind of wagon pulled by horses. What was it like to live back when horses were so important?

On the farms, the sturdy workhorses pulled the plows and other farm equipment across the fields. Farmers hitched their horses to wagons when they

Gabelmann Collection, ISHD



Even the horses were included in this photograph of a family on their farm near Charles City.

needed to get supplies in town. On Sundays and holidays, families needed their horses to get into town for church or celebrations. And now and then, there was time for a ride in the buggy or on horseback just for fun.

In towns and cities, horses pulled the fire engines and streetcars (if the town was modern enough to have streetcars then). If a family in town owned a horse and buggy, they probably had a carriage house or barn behind their house (like our garages today).

Livery stables were like car repair shops and car rental shops today. At the livery stable you could “park” and feed your horse, or you could rent a horse if you needed one for the day. You could also have harnesses and saddles repaired, get new horseshoes put on, or have wagons fixed at the livery stable.

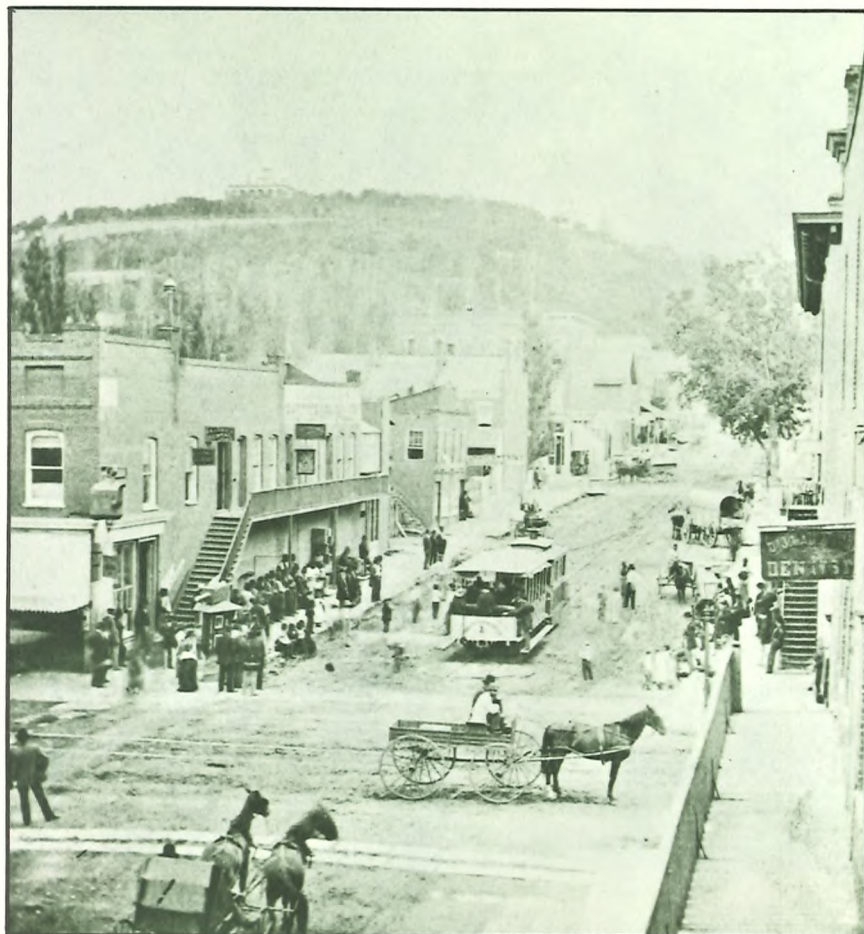
People traveled slower by horse than we do by car—most of the time. But speeding “runaway” horses were common—and dangerous. Horses were easily startled. A horse might be startled by paper blowing in the wind, and go galloping out of control down the street. The

noise from trains might scare the horses. A wagon or carriage pulled by a runaway team of horses could easily overturn. (And you know the passengers didn’t have seatbelts on!)

Working around a horse in a narrow stall was risky, too. A horse could kick hard, and injure or kill a person.

Most towns in Iowa still had dirt streets. They were not paved with cement or bricks yet. In the winter, ice and snow filled the streets. When the snow melted in the spring, the streets turned into deep mud. In the summer, they were dusty. And don’t forget the manure from horses and the flies it attracted. Today we battle the problems of pollution from cars. But streets in 1885 weren’t exactly spotless.

Yet Iowa couldn’t have gotten along without horses. In photographs, farm families posed proudly with their teams of workhorses. When a family in town bought a new horse and buggy, they would probably show it off to their neighbors. Iowans were proud of their horses. They knew that without horses the work couldn’t get done.



Flickering lights and other bright ideas

ELECTRICITY was starting to light up Iowa streets in 1885. Before this, someone had to light each gas street lamp every evening and turn it off later. On nights with a

Passengers wait for the horses to be hitched up to the first streetcar in Dubuque. What signs can you find that advertise businesses?



Children walk down a brick street in Davenport for a day at the park. Notice the bicyclist, the streetcar tracks, and the signs written in German.

full moon, towns would leave the gas lights off to save money.

Today we use electricity in many ways. It would be hard to get along without it. But in 1885 houses were still lit by kerosene or gas lights. People wondered if they should put electric lights in their houses. They wondered if electric lights would really be any better than gas lights. For example, a newspaper reporter wrote that workmen were stringing the electric wires above a few Iowa

City streets. But the reporter warned that "the steady hissing noise and slight flickering" of electric lights might be unpleasant *inside* a building.

More telephones were ringing in Iowa towns, too. For example, in the small town of Red Oak, sixty homes and businesses had telephones. At first a caller would ring the operator and ask for the name of the person to be called. The operator would connect wires on the

switchboard to make the call go through. But as more people got telephones, everyone was assigned a *number*. Then the caller gave the operator the number instead of the name. In a big town like Davenport, changing to the number system made the operator's job easier. And less mistakes were made.

Not everybody understood new inventions like telephones and electric lights. It took time to get used to all the changes, too. But

most people were excited about the changes. They knew electricity could make their lives easier and more pleasant.

Electricity didn't change Iowa farm life until thirty years later. It cost too much money to run the wires out to the country.

Look around your home or classroom. What machines do you see? When do you think they were invented? A machine that could record music had been invented by the 1880s. But it was not at all like the stereos, tape recorders, and radios of today.

Some people owned cameras in 1885. To have your picture taken,

you had to sit absolutely still for at least fifteen seconds, or the picture would be blurred. Sometimes people in old photographs look so serious and stiff. That's because they're trying so hard not to move. Is it easier to look serious or happy for fifteen seconds? Try it. Today, many families own cameras and take lots of pictures. Cameras can "freeze" action at a fraction of a second. And it's fun to buy or rent a movie camera and make home movies.

New inventions like typewriters made office work easier in 1885. But did anyone imagine a machine that could "remember" information—

like computers? Or a machine that could make a photocopy of a page in only a few seconds?

Adding machines that never made mistakes were invented around 1885. But they were big and had to be cranked by hand. Today we have calculators that are small enough to fit in a pocket and are run on batteries. Some calculators run on solar power, if enough light shines on them.

Maybe scientists were daydreaming about inventing the machines that we have today. But for most people in 1885, today's products would have been impossible to even imagine.

Medicine and madstones

IT WAS A GREAT DAY in the laboratory for Louis Pasteur (*loo-EE pas-TER*). In 1885 the French scientist had finally succeeded. He had discovered a cure for rabies.

But in Iowa, doctors still didn't have a cure for rabies. They probably hadn't even heard about Pasteur's discovery yet. Rabies was a deadly disease. If a farmer was bitten by an animal with rabies, the farmer would probably die.

Do you remember the shots you got at the doctor's office when you were very young? The shots (or immunizations) protect us from catching certain diseases (like typhoid fever, measles, scarlet fever, and diphtheria). Most people in the United States get the shots now. Hardly anyone catches those diseases anymore. You could say that the diseases are almost extinct in America.

But in 1885, thousands of people still died from those diseases. People didn't know as much as we do now about how diseases spread. For example, country schoolhouses didn't have drinking fountains like our schools do. The drinking water was kept in a bucket, and everyone shared the same cup. If someone was sick, the germs would easily spread.

Many of today's medicines hadn't been discovered yet. Doctors had a harder time curing people of serious

illnesses. And people couldn't always travel the long distance to a doctor or hospital. People tried home remedies, and sometimes they worked.

Sometimes people tried to cure rabies with a madstone. A madstone was an object from nature (sometimes it was a rock). It was supposed to have special powers. The madstone was held against the place where the animal had bitten. The madstone was supposed to "pull" the poison out of the wound.

Did a madstone work? Or was it just a superstition? An important veterinarian in Iowa thought it was all nonsense. But a doctor in Cedar Rapids said he would try a madstone if he got rabies. He didn't know any other way to cure rabies. He would give anything a try.

Some people tried patent medicines when they didn't feel good. People bought patent medicines from salesmen or in stores. Patent medicines were usually fake. They didn't even have real medicine in them. But they did have alcohol in them. The alcohol made people think they felt better—but only for a little while.

Since 1885 many scientists have made discoveries in their laboratories that help sick people. Someday a scientist will find a cure for cancer, just like Louis Pasteur did for rabies. Keeping people healthy is still a complicated job. But the discoveries made in this century make the job easier.

Can you guess these riddles about 1885?

1. What birthday present came in 214 pieces?
2. What book is part berry and part fish?
3. What's over 100 years old and wears a hat of gold?
4. What weighed 80 times more than a pig, and had a name that still means "big"?

Number 1: The Statue of Liberty. In 1885 a French ship arrived in the New York City harbor. The ship carried the 214 pieces of the statue, packed in crates. France gave the statue to America as a gift for our first century of freedom. It took months to build a base for the statue and to fit all the copper and iron pieces together.

For the next century, the statue was the first sight that millions of immigrants saw when they arrived in America. It was a symbol of the liberty (or freedom) that they hoped to find in this country.

Now America is cleaning and repairing the Statue of Liberty so that it will stand for many more centuries.



Number 2: *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. In 1885 the author Mark Twain published the book. It was about a boy's travels down the Mississippi River. Mark Twain knew a lot about life on the Mississippi. He had been born and raised in a town on the river (Hannibal, Missouri, just fifty miles south of the Iowa border).

In January of 1885 the famous author came to Keokuk, Iowa, to visit his mother. Everyone in Keokuk enjoyed the funny stories he told.

Americans still enjoy the books Mark Twain wrote a hundred years ago. Everyone has heard of his characters Tom Sawyer, Huck Finn, and Becky Thatcher.



Number 3: The Iowa State Capitol in Des Moines. The building had been finished in 1884. Inside its huge halls, the governor and the legislators faced some hard questions in 1885. Should Iowans be allowed to buy liquor? Or should it be against the law? Another question was how much should railroads charge farmers for sending crops to market on the train. Another question was how to settle the troubles at the coal mines in southern Iowa. The miners were refusing to work because they thought they weren't being paid fairly.

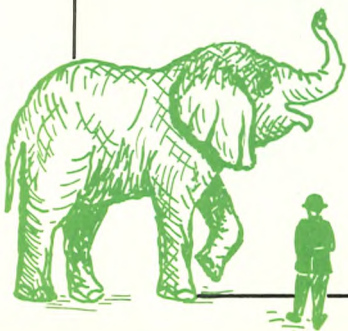
Today the gold dome on the Capitol looks as shiny as it did in 1885. Has your class ever taken a field trip to the Capitol?



Number 4: Jumbo the circus elephant. In 1885 a train hit and killed the famous elephant. People in America and England were sad to hear the news. Probably the saddest person was Jumbo's owner, P.T. Barnum.

Four years earlier, Barnum had bought the ten-ton elephant from the London zoo. Jumbo had been the favorite attraction at the zoo for many years. People in London (even Queen Victoria) were upset that Jumbo had been sold. In America Jumbo soon became the star of Barnum's circus. Barnum advertised Jumbo as "the world's largest elephant." Soon people were calling anything big "jumbo-sized."

Today we still use "jumbo" as a word to mean very big.



1885: Children's chores

Now: How do you help out?



Foster Collection. ISHD

Even small children had chores to do. This girl from Iowa Falls scatters feed for the baby chicks.

Help with the laundry

1885: Pump water from outside and carry it to washtubs. (If it's winter, bring in snow to melt.) Scrub clothes on washboard. Rinse them by hand. Wring them out by hand, or run them through the wringer while you turn it by hand. Hang up the clothes to dry. Iron them tomorrow. Ask Ma to darn the holes in your socks.

Now: How long does it take to do the laundry in your house?

Help with housecleaning

1885: Drag the carpets outside. Whack the dust out of them with carpet beaters. Air out the feather pillows and comforters. Dust the furniture. Trim the wicks on the kerosene lamps. Wash the soot off their glass chimneys.

Now: How do you divide housecleaning jobs in your family?

Fix supper tonight

1885: Look in the root cellar for vegetables (or in the garden if it's summer). Check for any dried or cured meat. Mix the bread dough and let it rise. Keep the fire going in the cookstove. Milk the cow for fresh milk for

the table. Put the bread in the oven, and start the water boiling for the vegetables.

Now: What do you like to cook for supper?

Help with the farmwork

1885: Feed the livestock. Gather the eggs. Curry the new team of workhorses so they get used to you. When it's time to plow, they'll need to trust you and follow your commands in the field.

Now: If you live on a farm, what are your chores?

Take care of the baby all morning

1885: Boil water for a batch of oatmeal. Keep the baby from crawling near the woodstove. Get some cloth diapers out of the cupboard. Find the baby's wooden blocks.

Now: What do you like about baby-sitting for little children? What do you dislike about the job?

Help your parents at their jobs

1885: In your parents' store, dust everything on the shelves. If it's winter, keep the fire going in the stove and take out the ashes. Clear the snow off the board sidewalk outside. If it's summer, swat flies all day. Scoop out and weigh the beans, sugar, and coffee for customers. Walk down to the train station to see if the new order of supplies has come in yet.

Now: Where do your parents work? Do you ever help them at their jobs?



One farmer rides the binder, while another sets the bundles of grain into shocks. The children's job is to bring water and lunch out to the field.



Going barefoot would have been fun in this schoolyard with shade trees and thick grass. This school was near West Branch.

Iowa schools

WHAT WAS SCHOOL like a hundred years ago in Iowa? You'll find the answers in the following descriptions. They come from longer stories written by Iowans about their schools.

A town school

Catherine Wiggins Porter went to school in a small town named Coin, in southwestern Iowa. Her school had two rooms upstairs and two downstairs. Each morning the teacher called roll. Students answered with an old saying or a Bible verse. After a few songs, it was time for reading, writing, arithmetic, spelling, and geography.

Catherine walked home for lunch. But on some winter days she stayed to go sledding during noon recess. The teacher lived at her house, and he would bring her lunch back for her.

In warm weather, recess games were crack-the-whip and jumping rope. A popular thing to do was to sign each other's autograph album. Sometimes students wrote verses like this one: *"Remember me when [you are] far far off, Where the woodchucks die of whooping cough."*

The afternoon started with a song or two. Then it was time for more subjects. But on Friday afternoons the class had spelling or arithmetic matches. Or they might practice reciting for the community performance that night. At night adults came to hear the students recite the poems or speeches they had memorized.

Sometimes special visitors came to school. A visiting musician sang and played the organ. Another visitor brought a box with wires and knobs on it. The

students could touch the wires and feel a slight electrical shock.

At the end of the day, students answered roll call with the number of times they had whispered or misbehaved. Otherwise they said "perfect."

A country school

Rosa Schreur Jennings was a country school teacher. Country schoolhouses had only one classroom. At the first school where she taught, there was only one small blackboard, and no extra money to buy another. To get more writing space, Rosa painted part of the wall black.

Country teachers were paid more in the winter than in the summer because there were more students in the winter. The busy farmwork was over for awhile, so farm boys had time to come to school. Sometimes there were fifty students in the classroom, between the ages of five and twenty.

Children walked one or two miles to school, even in the winter. By the time they got to school, the teacher had a good fire going in the iron stove in the center of the room. Throughout the day the children left their desks to warm up next to the stove. One day the long stove pipe fell down, scattering ashes and soot all over.

When the weather warmed up, a favorite chore was fetching water from a nearby farm. Then one student passed the bucket around to the other classmates. Everyone took a drink from the dipper. Then they filled glass bottles kept on their desks. They wrote with chalk on slates instead of on paper. To "erase" their writing, they wet a rag with the water in the bottle, and wiped the slate clean.

Now and then, Rosa took the children to visit another school. Sometimes it was a surprise visit. The two schools had contests in spelling, arithmetic, and geography. Even the youngest children were in the contests.

No rules for schools?

In 1885 there was no rule that Iowa children had to go to school. Some children could only come to school a few months each year, and only for two or three years. If they lived on a farm, their parents needed their help. Even in the cities, some children had to have jobs to earn money for their families. For many children, going to school every day was impossible.

Adults disagreed about how much training teachers needed before they could teach. They disagreed about what subjects should be taught. Schools did not provide textbooks. Students had to buy their own at the local store or use hand-me-down books. These problems meant that students were being taught in many different ways. Until rules were made, not all students got the best education they deserved.

Blanche wrote in her diary about quiet evenings like this. Here a Jones County family relaxes together.



Dear Diary

BLOOMING PRAIRIE in Pocahontas County, Iowa, was home to 18-year-old Blanche Enid Van Alstine. In 1870 her parents and the seven Van Alstine children had moved from Illinois to northwestern Iowa. The Van Alstines must have been successful farmers, because by 1884 they were building a bigger and nicer house. Down the road, Blanche's older brother was beginning his farm. As he plowed under the prairie sod, he uncovered buffalo bones hidden in the rich soil.

Seventy years later, in 1955, Blanche's niece gave the old, faded diary to Ruth Van Alstine. It was later donated to the Iowa State Historical Department. Only parts of the diary are printed here. What Blanche wrote is printed in italics (*like this*). An ellipsis (. . .) shows where words have been left out. Words in brackets [*like these*] have been added to explain what Blanche probably meant. This is now Blanche began her diary one hundred years ago:

October 1, 1884. *I am going to write my first "Entry" tonight, as I know I must make a beginning sometime. Pa went to Ft. Dodge this morning on the passenger train and returned this afternoon. I am still young but I could not help but think of a time not long past when Pa wished to go to the city he [needed to] 'hitch up' the mules and start at daybreak so as to get there early and have sufficient [enough] time to do his trading and be ready to return home the following morning.*

Travel by train was easier, and sometimes safer, than

by horses or mules. For example, there was the day when Blanche's father had driven the team of mules and wagon into nearby Humboldt. He was loading up sacks of flour and sugar and two big jugs of molasses. Suddenly his son stormed into town and told his father the bad news. Back at home, Blanche had been horseback riding. Her foot had slipped in a rope stirrup, and she had been dragged half-a-mile across the prairie.

Her father jumped in the wagon and headed for home, whipping the mules to go faster. He didn't notice that the corks had popped off the molasses jugs. Slowly the molasses seeped into the loose straw in the wagon. The straw stuck to her father, to the reins, and to everything else.

By the time he reached home, the doctor was already there, treating Blanche's injuries. At that moment, everyone was worried about Blanche. But in later years the family would laugh at the day the father had burst in the house—covered with sticky straw.

November 4, 1884. . . . *Election day. . . . This whole United States will be in suspense until it is known who is our President.*

December 26, 1884. *I have just finished writing a letter to Uncle Milo. . . . Pa is reading "The Children of the Abbey" and Leslie is deeply absorbed in [a book by] Longfellow. Ma is busily sewing on a comforter.*

Winter evenings in the Van Alstine home were often spent like this. Lots of thick comforters were needed to keep warm in bed. Some nights the house was so cold

that Blanche's houseplants froze.

The family often had overnight houseguests. Their home was near the railroad, and many people were taking the train to northwestern Iowa to buy farmland. Blanche's father often invited them to stay at his home. Twenty years before this, he had fought in the Civil War. Like many Americans in 1885, he still talked about the war.

December 31, 1884. . . . *Mr. Brown is here this evening and he and Pa are recalling war [stories]. . . . They have talked uninterruptedly for three hours.*

January 15, 1885. *Has been another lovely day—overhead at least. Ma thought she would wash, so this morning I brought snow in to melt and before I finished I began to think the boiler was bottomless for I carried—I don't know how many pailsful before it grew visibly any fuller. . . . I was quite interested meanwhile in watching a mule team which was frightened by the railroad cars and in spite of the efforts of the driver, ran.*

March 11, 1885. . . . *the mud will soon disappear if this pleasant weather continues. . . . I made the attempt to [visit my brother]. . . . but I got stuck in the mud about a rod away from the house so I gave it up.*

March 24, 1885. . . . *We have not attacked our weekly washing but it is an evil unavoidable, I suppose.*

I thought I would begin Ma's new dress this morning but could not find the pattern so think one will have to be manufactured. I succeeded in getting the [sewing] machine to go after rubbing and oiling alternately, and made two new aprons—one for Ma and one for myself.

Today people wear aprons to keep their clothes clean when they cook. People did that in 1885, too, of course. But women and girls also would put a clean apron on over a dress that had been worn the last few days. The dress wasn't spotless, but the apron made it look all right. In this way women didn't need to do the laundry so often, and they didn't need so many dresses. As Blanche complained, washing clothes was a huge job. No one wanted to do more laundry than she had to.

July 21, 1885. *Clara came down last Sat. afternoon and stayed with us until Sunday 5 PM. We had as usual a gay little visit nor must I forget to mention our swim; it was just glorious in spite of mosquitoes & bugs!*

Blanche and her friend probably had gone swimming across the road in Lake Disappear. That was the family's name for a low place that filled up with water after a heavy rain. For a few days it would be a shallow pond with a grassy bottom—just right for a swim. When the water seeped away, swimming would be over at Lake Disappear until the next heavy rain.

August 23, 1885. . . . *I [received] a six page letter*



Blanche helped cook for the threshers. Threshing grain was hot and dusty work. As the grain was separated from the stalk, the grain poured into a wagon. The stalks were piled into tall straw stacks.

from [Uncle Milo] . . . He was present at the funeral of Gen. Grant and described the coffin and tomb and says the line of soldiers . . . measured the entire distance of seven & half miles.

The letter was about the funeral of Ulysses S. Grant in late July. Grant had been President of the United States for eight years, from 1869 through 1876. But he was more famous because he had commanded the Union Army in the Civil War. Even though the war had been over for twenty years, people still remembered the sadness it caused.

September 25, 1885. . . . *Mrs. Melson stopped a few moments Wed. morning to see whether I had yet become a member of the C.L.S.C. and if so, whether I was discouraged & given up the attempt. My outlook is certainly discouraging, for I have no time for study. . . . I do not intend to give up by any means.*

Blanche loved to read. The C.L.S.C. was a reading club that she wanted to join. But she didn't have much extra time or money for such pleasures.

Blanche did have plenty of work. Sometimes Sena came to help. Sena was ten years old and lived down the road. Sena's father, Mr. Jensen, had moved to America from Denmark. In the old Danish tradition, he named his daughter "Jensine Jensen" (repeating the father's last name as the child's first name). But the girl wanted to show her "American-ness," not that she was Danish. She wanted to be called "Sena."

September 28, 1885. . . . *Aunt Hattie didn't require [Cousin Lottie's] help so much this week as she*

will the next as they expect to have threshers and they will [be as hungry] as they always are! . . . I have not entered the name of the list of the C.L.S.C. . . . I dread to ask Pa for I fear he will think it is money thrown away.

Blanche might have thought that the busy harvest time was a bad time to ask her father for money to join the reading club. At harvest time, all the farmers and hired men in the neighborhood worked together to thresh the grain. When they finished at one farm, they would move on to the next farm. The women's job was to prepare huge meals for the threshers. The women worked for hours fixing all the food. But the food seemed to disappear in minutes when the hungry men sat down at the table.

[December 2, 1885.] *The second day of December and no snow! how pleasant it seems and we Iowans can hardly realize that it is winter without snow, icicles and blizzards! . . . [Florence's letter says that she] is now at work in a mill and by the way she does not say whether it is a flour mill or a cloth mill, but I suppose it must be [a cloth mill. She] receives five dollars a week which would eventually become quite a little amount if not obligated to pay many expenses.*

Blanche's friend Florence probably did work in a cloth (or textile) mill in New England. In the 1880s there were not many jobs that women could have. Working in a textile mill was one way a woman could earn money.

Blanche's diary ends after a few more days in 1886.

Right on your own front porch

EVERY MORNING another history book is tossed on your front porch. That history book is the newspaper.

Most of the information in this *Goldfinch* came from newspapers of Iowa towns one hundred years ago. Every day the newspaper reported the good news of the town (like new street lights or a holiday parade). And every day it reported the town's bad news (like a death from illness or a horse accident). The editors wrote about their own

opinions, on everything from politics to roller skating.

Even though the news from 1885 is now very old, it tells us what life was like back then. The ads even tell us what kinds of soap or clothes or horse harnesses people might have bought. The newspaper was like the diary of a community.

Sometimes people keep personal diaries. Do you write in a diary every day? A diary is like a history book of one person's life.

Blanche's diary tells us a lot

about one Iowa farm family in 1885. Not every farm family was like Blanche's. But from her diary we find out that some farmers traveled by horse and by train. We find out that neighbors worked together at harvest time. And we find out that Blanche hated washing clothes and loved reading books.

Blanche never became a famous person in history. But history is about un-famous people, too, and what their everyday lives were like.

Jollifications and other fun

*The town of Sumner
celebrates the
Fourth of July.*



HOW DID Iowa children have fun a hundred years ago? In the winter, they went sledding and ice skating, of course. They enjoyed the special game and puzzle page in newspapers. People gave parties, sometimes called *jollifications*. Remember that there were no movies, televisions, radios, or stereos. But many towns had small theaters (called opera houses). Traveling actors performed there, and famous authors gave speeches.

Summer meant more work, especially for the farmers. But there were more ways to have fun, too. Small towns had their own bands. The nine boys in the band at Boone, Iowa, played at town celebrations.

The band might have played in the parade on *Decoration Day*. Decoration Day was a day for remembering the soldiers who had died in the Civil War. People brought flowers to decorate soldiers' graves. They listened to long speeches honoring the soldiers. (We call this holiday in late May *Memorial Day*, and we honor American soldiers of all wars.)

Most small towns had a baseball team. Larger towns had several teams. Teams of railroad workers played against teams of bootblacks (who shined shoes as their job). Today local leagues have teams of people from the same company or business.

People had fun seeing who was the best at a certain skill. Who could shoot the most targets? Who could spell the most words right? Who could saw the most logs in a half-hour? Who made the best pies? Whose team of horses could pull the heaviest load of stones? (This contest was like a tractor pull at a fair today.)

Celebrating Independence Day often started at dawn. In Indianola on July 4, 1885, the newspaper reported: "At four o'clock this morning the bells began to ring and from then until now the people have been

alive with enthusiasm." At ten o'clock "Old Ike," the war horse, led the parade. At noon people ate picnic lunches, and listened to long speeches. Later, people played baseball or entered races. There were bicycle and bronco races. There were separate races for boys, fat men, or women on horseback. Fireworks ended the evening.

A few months later, the blacks in Davenport celebrated a special kind of independence day. Blacks in the West Indies Islands were no longer slaves. Blacks in Davenport celebrated freedom from slavery, even though Iowa was a long way from the West Indies.

Holidays were often a time for *immigrants* to get together. Immigrants were people who were born in a foreign country, and who moved to America for their new homes. In 1885 almost one-fifth of all Iowans were immigrants.

When immigrants first arrived in Iowa, they usually chose to live near others from the same country in Europe. Celebrating special holidays with their old customs reminded them of the countries they had left behind. For example, the Scots celebrated the birthday of a famous poet from Scotland. The Irish celebrated St. Patrick's Day.

In many towns immigrants started their own clubs or bands, like the Italian band in Dubuque. German immigrants and their families started Turner Societies. If you belonged to a Turner Society you could join the gymnastic group, the singing club, or the acting troupe. Many towns had newspapers written in foreign languages.

For the immigrants and their families, learning new customs and languages in America was not always easy. Celebrating in their old ways seemed familiar and comforting.

Slippery places

LEGS AND ARMS are nightly broken,” the newspaper reported. “Shoulders are dislocated.” Is this a doctor’s report about skate boarding? Football practice? Break dancing?

No, it was about the big fad in 1885—roller skating. (A fad is something that is very popular for a while. Then people get tired of it. They want something new to do.)

Many Americans thought skating was great fun and good exercise for children and adults. But others thought it was too rough. Or they thought that there were better ways to use free time.

It’s fun to read Iowa newspapers from 1885 for information about roller skating. You can find out which towns had skating rinks. At the rink in Iowa City, there were backwards races and three-mile races on New Year’s Day. In Ottumwa, prizes were given for the most awkward gentleman skater, and for “catching the turkey.” (What do you think that contest was like?)

The newspapers also report what people thought about skating. Some ministers were worried that young people would go skating instead of to school. They

wanted the adults in charge of the rinks to keep control over rowdy skaters. They even talked about skating in their Sunday sermons.

But in Marshalltown a newspaper writer thought ministers shouldn’t worry. He remembered a Bible verse about “sinners who stand in slippery places.” But he didn’t think the verse was about the evils of roller skating.

Was roller skating like other American fads? Read what a newspaper in St. Paul, Minnesota, had to say about it:

Americans ride the bicycle until they are limp with broken bones. They roll on skates until they roll themselves into the cemetery. Their tendency is to do everything [too much. No sport will stay popular for very long]. Even base ball is a little under the weather. Even chewing gum is getting into ill repute. The bicycle is not the overwhelming passion which it once was. Archery is declining. And the roller skating rink will surely decline and ‘fall off.’

Sometimes fads go in and out of style. What are fads in America today? Ask your parents or grandparents what fads they enjoyed as children. Do any of them sound like your fads?

Circus day

Any Iowa child who saw the circus in 1885 might have written a letter like this to a friend. The day the circus came to town was the best day all summer.

DEAR PAUL,

Well, the circus train pulled into town yesterday. My sister and I went down to the station early, to watch them unload the elephants. They say one of the elephants is the biggest in the world.

Then we left to go find a good place on Main Street for watching the parade. All the farmers were already coming into town. Seems like everybody in the county was in town yesterday. Finally we heard the band starting up, and everybody started cheering.

There must have been two dozen horses pulling the bandwagon. They were all white as snow, and had feathers on their heads and brass rings on their harnesses. I don’t know how the driver ever got a team of 24 horses to mind him. The band sat on top of the wagon, playing march music.

The lions came next, in big cages on the wagons. They seemed awful close to us! One wagon had glass windows instead of bars. There were huge snakes inside, bigger than that bull snake I killed last year.

All the wagons had fancy carving painted shiny gold.

There were dragons and mermaids and angels and eagles on the wagons, all gold or bright colors. Some wagons looked like pictures in my geography book about other lands. One fairy tale wagon had statues of Cinderella and the prince on it.

Even the wagon wheels were pretty. The spokes were painted red and orange and yellow. They looked like the rays of the sun. I’ve never seen wagons like these, not even in the livery stable. The clowns kept playing tricks on the crowd. Ma liked all the bands.

I had never seen a hippopotamus before. They said it was from Egypt and was pure white. But it just looked hot to me. There was a white bear, too. And jungle birds and monkeys. I never knew there were so many kinds of animals in the world. But the elephants were my favorites. Each one wore a blanket covered with sparkly jewels. All the circus people wore sparkly costumes, too.

After the parade they set up a little zoo. But everybody wanted the show to get started in the tent.

My favorite acts were the man who did somersaults while his horse galloped around, and the woman who rode a bicycle on a high wire. I’m too tired to tell you any more. Some people didn’t even go to the show. They said the parade was plenty fun for one day.

YOUR FRIEND, TOM



Indians and their tipis were part of the Wild West Show. The wagon in the background probably hauled water for the horses and buffalo in the show.

Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show

WHAT IF William Cody had stayed in Iowa? What if he and his family had never moved away from the little town of Le Claire, in Scott County, where he was born in 1846? Would Will Cody ever have become "Buffalo Bill"?

But the Cody family did leave Iowa, when Will was a boy. In Kansas he had a job delivering messages between wagon trains heading west. As he grew older, he had jobs as a Pony Express rider, a stagecoach driver, and a scout with Wild Bill Hickock. Then the railroad companies hired him to kill buffalo. Railroads were being built out west, and the workers needed buffalo meat for food. Cody shot so many buffalo that he got the nickname "Buffalo Bill."

If he had stayed in Iowa, could he have gotten any of those jobs here? Probably not. Railroads carried the mail in Iowa, so the Pony Express wasn't needed here. People moving to Iowa didn't need a scout to show them the way. There hadn't been any buffalo in the state for many years. He could have worked as a stagecoach driver. But it was more exciting to work in the West. And Buffalo Bill loved excitement and adventure.

Reporters began writing stories about his adventures out west. The stories were exaggerated, but the readers loved the stories. Buffalo Bill became a western hero to people who lived in the East. That gave him an idea. Why not bring the Wild West to the settled East?

In 1883 he put together a show. It was like a circus. But Buffalo Bill didn't bring elephants, tigers, and clowns to New York. He brought buffalo, cowboys,

and Indians. And New Yorkers loved it.

The show was like a western movie today. Cowboys battled against Indians. Pony Express riders dashed about. Indian chiefs sat proudly on their horses. A small herd of buffalo thundered by, stirring up clouds of dust. Behind all this was a huge painted scene of the Wyoming mountains.

In 1885 a young woman named Annie Oakley joined the Wild West Show. She was a terrific target-shooter. No matter how difficult the target, she never missed. That same year the show played in New Orleans. A world's fair was in New Orleans at the same time. Iowans who traveled to the fair could see the Wild West Show one day. The next day they could go to the fair to see the display from Iowa.

The Wild West Show even went to Europe. Victoria was the queen of England then. She loved the show, and so did the other royalty in the audience. Visiting kings even rode in the stagecoach during the performance.

The show was just as popular back in America. It played near the Chicago world's fair in 1893. Many Iowans probably took the train into Chicago to see the fair and Buffalo Bill's show. Early in the 1900s the show probably came to Iowa cities like Davenport. Your grandparents might have seen it.

Maybe Buffalo Bill's show made the West seem more exciting than it really was. But audiences loved to watch the show, just as we enjoy a good adventure movie.

your turn

1. Have you heard of the Ringling Brothers' Circus? Their first circus was in their backyard, when they were boys in McGregor, Iowa, in 1870. Have you ever put on a circus in your backyard? What acts were in it? What part did you play?
2. Choose an old photograph from your family's collection. Make up a story about the day the photo was taken. Include details about the people, the place, the season, and why the photo was taken.
3. Take this *Goldfinch* for a walk around town. Find buildings that match the ones on page 13. Look especially at the tops of buildings and around upper-story windows. The buildings were probably built around 1880.
4. Have you ever driven past a one-room schoolhouse in the country? Some have been turned into homes or small museums. Some are used by farmers for storing crops. Ask your grandparents if they attended a country school.
5. Look for the two photographs in this *Goldfinch* where someone's movement made a blur in the picture.
6. Ask your parents to drive by the section of town with large, old houses in it. Do any of the houses still have carriage houses or barns behind them?
7. In her diary on March 11, Blanche wrote that she got stuck in the mud a *rod* away from her house. How far is a rod?
8. On November 4, Blanche writes about the election for president. Find out who won the election.
9. A reporter joked that Des Moines should build ferry boats or suspension bridges over their streets. Why do you think he said that?
10. Your great-grandparents were probably children in the 1880s. Find out where they lived. What do you think their childhoods were like?
11. Looking for a good book to read on the circus? Try *Toby Tyler or Ten Weeks with a Circus* by James Otis, written in 1880.

next time

- How did the Blue Earth River get its name?
- What happened on the Missouri River on April Fool's Day in 1865?
- How do you harvest ice?

Look for the answers in the next *Goldfinch*, on Iowa rivers.

Cover: A small band performs in the dirt streets of Elkader, Iowa, in the summer of 1884. The boys are holding the music. (D. C. Hale Collection, ISHD)

GINALIE SWAIM, Editor

© 1985 Iowa State Historical Department

No portion of THE GOLDFINCH may be reproduced without prior permission. All illustrations are from the collections of the Iowa State Historical Department, Iowa City, unless otherwise indicated. Editorial assistance and research for this issue were provided by Raymond A. Smith, Jr., Barbara Danley, and Mary Jean Port. Artwork by Kay Chambers. A list of major sources used in compiling this issue is available on request from the editor.